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DISTORTION OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY IN THE CONCEPT OF “RUSSIAN WORLD”

By Oleksandr Lukyanenko

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Abstract

The article continues the series of research illustrating the formation of the idea of the “Russian world” in the religious discourse of Orthodox Russia. Primary attention is paid to the ideological stamps used by the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill while preaching and giving public speeches. The study summarizes the idea of the monolithic “Holy Rus” with Moscow as a “true holy city” developed to support Vladimir Putin’s annexationist geopolitical policy. The paper cites examples of falsification of historical facts in religious and political spheres applied with the intention to form a strong propagandist background in the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Kirill Gundyayev uses the images of the Battle of Kulikovo and the medieval Moscow prince Dmitry Donskoy to draw historical parallels with Russia’s current war with Ukraine. To strengthen his own position as the head of the modern religious front, the Patriarch repeatedly returns to the ideological concept of the blessed war, using legends about the blessing of the troops and divine providence in the medieval wars of the Moscow principality.

Key words: Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, “Russian world,” Russian-Ukrainian war, Kulikovo battle, Segius of Radonezh, propaganda.

The Orthodox Component of the Ideology of the “Russian world”

The idea of a “Russian world,” which formed the basis of the ideological justification for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014 with the occupation of Crimea and the eastern part of the country, and later the start of a large-scale offensive on February 24, 2022, uses the people’s fictitious historical memory to justify geopolitical games. It would be more correct to say that the very concept of the “Russian world” became a tool for the formation of the pseudo-historical past, which, like synthetic blood, began to feed this ideological “Frankenstein’s monster,” crafted from the ideas of the Russian chauvinistic imperial past, Sovietism from the era of the “Brezhnev stagnation,” with admixtures of specific elements of Moscow Stalinist Orthodoxy. The Church turned itself into a separate state body--a new “Ministry of propaganda”--becoming

a “soft, sharp and evil power” in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as Alar Kilp and Jerry G. Pankhurst defined its role.¹ Religious figures of the entire hierarchy, starting with the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill (Gundyaev), became the promulgator of this concept. In his sermons, the Patriarch not only is revealed not only to voice Kremlin ideas, but also participates in the creation of newly polished but long established historical and cultural fakes. Appealing to bygone events in sermons and messages, the First Hierarch of the Russian Church sculpts the “false memory” of his flock, arbitrarily and one-sidedly interpreting phenomena and events of the past. His messages claim to sound like the essence of the experience of the church and the people. However, on closer analysis, the entire purity of such spiritual heritage becomes questionable.

One of the key concepts in the Orthodox ideology of the “Russian world” is the idea of conducting a “special military operation” on the territory of Ukraine for the purpose of establishing “historical justice”—the restoration of the unified space of Rus. As Paul Mojzes states, these efforts to rebuild the legendary unity of the Holy Rus are undertaken by the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church to ensure Vladimir Putin’s attempt to reestablish the Russian Empire at its maximal borders.² In this modern symphony of Russian state and church, Patriarch Kirill especially emphasizes the sanctity and military power of this seemingly monolithic socio-cultural space of the late Middle Ages.

The Sacralization of the Battle of Kulikovo

In the course of spewing militant-Orthodox propaganda, Patriarch Kirill periodically exploits the military past of Rus during the period of feudal fragmentation (11th-14th centuries).³ With such appeals, the spiritual mentor of the Russians tries to prove that without the presence of the Orthodox Church on the battlefield, Russia would not win any war. One of these ideological devices is the myth of Saint Sergius of Radonezh’s blessing of the Moscow prince Dmitry Ivanovich Donskoy (1350-1389) for the battle against the Tatar horde under the command of emir Mamai on the Kulikovo field in 1380.

In his speech on the Feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos after the Liturgy at the Zachatievskiy Stauropygian Monastery in Moscow on September 21, 2022, Kirill

¹ Alar Kilp, and Jerry G. Pankhurst, (2022) “Soft, Sharp, and Evil Power: The Russian Orthodox Church in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 5 , Article 2, 1.

² Paul B. Mojzes, (2022) “Editorial: Blending of Delusions in Russia Rationalizing its War to Annex Ukraine,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 7 , Article 2, vii.

³ О. В. Лук’яненко, Коды «священной войны» та «істинної віри» у концепції «русского міра». *Культурологічний альманах* [Lukyanenko, O. V. Codes of “holy war” and “true faith” in the concept of “Russian world”. *Culturological almanac*], 2023, 1, 40–46.

(Gundyaev) tries to make this maxim decisive for clarifying the leading worldview role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia's latest war with Ukraine. He notes:

Today is associated with the memory of the great victory of our people, its spiritual feat, with the memory of how spiritual authority influenced the formation of courage and heroism. I mean, first of all, the blessing of Saint Sergius of Radonezh, given to Dmitry Donskoy. How all this formed the true spiritual strength of our army, which won the victory in the historical battle. This is an excursion into history from our church point of view. This point of view is not present in secular historical science, but in vain, because it is this approach to history that highlights the most important thing—the spiritual dimension in the life of people and the state, without which victory, in the conditions of fading faith and spirit, becomes impossible.⁴

The very idea of the Battle of Kulikovo as the first battle of the Slavs against the Golden Horde was formulated by the Russian imperial historian Nikolay Karamzin in the 19th century in his twelve-volume *History of the Russian State* and since then has been used as a brick in the construction of the ideological foundation of “the capital city status” of Moscow.

The patriarch actually broadcasts the Russian imperial stamp on the unity of the church and state power, introduced by N. Karamzin. In it, the blessing of one of the most revered saints of medieval Rus to the ruler of Moscow for the battle with the Tatars, raised into the category of the historical canon, plays a decisive role. In order to understand the full depth of the sacredness of this event for the Russian pseudo-historical consciousness, we quote N. Karamzin, drawing the reader's attention to all the words that emphasize the mysticism of the meeting between the prince and the old man:

Dmitry, arranging the regiments for the performance, wished with his brother Vladimir Andreyevich, with all the Princes and Voivodes, to receive the blessing of Sergius, Abbot of the secluded Trinity Monastery already famous for the virtues of its founder. This holy old man, rejecting the world, still loved Russia,⁵ its glory and prosperity: the chroniclers say that he prophesied to Dmitry a terrible bloodshed, but a victory—the death of many Orthodox heroes, but the salvation of the Grand Duke; asked him to dine in the monastery, sprinkled holy water on all the military commanders who were with him, and gave him two monks as companions, named Aleksandr Peresvet and Oslyabya, the first of whom was once a boyar of Bryansk and a brave knight. Sergius handed them the sign of the cross on the scheme and said: “Here is an incorruptible weapon! Let it serve you instead of helmets!” Dmitry left the monastery with a new and even stronger hope for heavenly help.⁶

⁴ Слово Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла в праздник Рождества Пресвятой Богородицы после Литургии в Зачатьевском ставропигиальном монастыре г. Москвы 21 сентября 2022 года. [Word of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin after the Liturgy in the Zachatiev Stavropygial Monastery in Moscow on September 21, 2022]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5961645.html>

⁵ Note the formulation of the idea: it was hard for the old saint to love “Russia” in 1380 knowing that it appeared as a state only in 1721 after Peter the Great change the name of The Tsardom of Muscovy to All-Russian empire.

⁶ Карамзин Н. *История государства Российского в 12 томах. Том 5.* Москва: Наука. 1993, 39. [Karamzin N. *History of the State of Russia in 12 volumes. Volume 5.* Moscow: Nauka. 1993, 39]: https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Nikolaj_Karamzin/istorija-gosudarstva-rossijskogo-v-12-tomah-tom-5-1993/.

Patriarch Kirill needs such a parallel as “Dmitry Donskoy–Sergius of Radonezh” in order to prove his own rightful succession in the transfer of God’s grace for “military exploits” to the head of the Russian state, without which victory over any new enemy is impossible. In fact, this is a double game. On the one hand, the patriarch continues to inflate the idea of Holy Rus, which, as it were, Vladimir Putin is constructing with his aggressive wars of the 21st century. On the other hand, Kirill finds himself in a ruthless domestic political game, in which the patriarch can easily cease to be one of the key figures on the domestic and geopolitical chessboard due to a careless word, untimely silence or timid action. The constant reminder of the symbiosis of the government and the church through such historical images allows the Russian patriarchy to stay afloat in the changing sea of the Moscow autocracy.

The establishment of ideological parallels between the times of the Mongol rule over Moscow and the modern confrontation of the Russian Federation with the “collective West” took place over many years. Patriarch Kirill used the image of Dmitry Donsky to hint at the legacy of the goals of the Grand Duke and President Putin to end conflicts within the “united Slavic people.” The spiritual leader of Russian Christians formed the idea that there should finally be a blessed battle and a blessed leader (meaning, of course, Putin) who would help the country stand between enemies from the east and the west, as the medieval ruler of Moscow once did:

Grand Duke Dmitry Ivanovich took the Moscow throne in difficult times for the country. The Russian principalities, torn apart by civil strife, suffering from attacks from the east and west, needed to consolidate their forces under the leadership of a wise statesman. Such was the Grand Duke Dmitry, who led the fight against the Horde yoke. The Russian troops under his command defeated the enemy on the Kulikovo field, thus opening the way to the unification of the Russian lands and their liberation from foreign rule. History has conveyed to us the words of Rev. Sergius of Radonezh, who blessed the Grand Duke for the battle: “You will defeat, sir, your adversaries, as befits you, our sovereign.”⁷

Orthodox Militarism and the Idea of Sergius’ Blessing

In my past research, I have already discussed the militarization of Russian Orthodoxy while supporting Putin’s idea of the “Russian world” by the Moscow Church⁸ and illustrated the various components of that religious and ideological system on the basis of the brief analysis

⁷ Патриаршее приветствие участникам торжественного вечера «Дмитрий Донской. Государь. Воин. Защитник веры», 2019 [Patriarchal greetings to the participants of the gala evening “Dmitry Donskoy. Sovereign. Warrior. Defender of the Faith, 2019]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5494951.html>

⁸ See: Oleksandr Lukyanenko, (2023) "Militarism in the Spiritual Code of the Modern Orthodox “Russian World,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 4 , Article 3. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol43/iss4/3>.

of Dmitry Donskoy and the Battle of Kulikovo.⁹ The Russian and, certainly, the entire post-Soviet, intellectual elite to one degree or another encountered the debunking of numerous facts about the Battle of Kulikovo widely presented in historiography. Nevertheless, the leader of Russian Orthodox Christians repeatedly emphasizes the military success of old-day Russia with the support of religious figures:

Wasn't the Battle of Kulikovo a miracle, in which, from all points of view, the Russians had to suffer a crushing defeat, and our land had to completely submit to a foreign force? But the Reverend blesses Dmitry Donskoy, and the Russian army delivers the first crushing blow to the military power that conquered the vast expanses of Eurasia. You can explain what happened on the Kulikovo field in any way you like, but it is no coincidence that St. Dmitry Donskoy went to the Reverend Sergius to ask his blessing for this battle, and, of course, with the prayers of the Reverend, which were combined with the greatest military feat of our warriors, this historic victory was won.¹⁰

However, the very idea of "Sergius' blessing" is probably used only for the average parishioner. Here we note that Patriarch Kirill does not even pay attention to sources of church origin or chronicles, the authors of which were monks. Thus, the original record of 1380 by the Rogozhsky Chronicler "About the war and the great massacre on the Vozh"¹¹ and the article similar in content to it in 1380 of the Simeonovskaya Chronicle, in the description of the preparations for the campaign of Dmitry of Don and the description of the battle itself do not mention the name of Sergius of Radonezh at all. Nor do they write about any blessing of the Grand Duke for the war. There is only a record that is completely understandable for a religious worldview: "And God helped the great prince Dmitry Ivanovich..."¹²

In the section "About the great massacre on the Don" of the Trinity Chronicle¹³ and in the chapter "On the Great Battle on the Don" of the Simeonovskaya Chronicle, there is no mention of the saint's participation in the battle in one form or another—either as one who

⁹ Oleksandr Lukyanenko, (2023) "Manipulative Christianity: (Pseudo) Historical and Cultural Codes in the Concept of "Russian World"," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 2 , Article 4. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol43/iss2/4>

¹⁰ *Патриаршая проповедь в день памяти преподобного Сергия Радонежского. 8 октября 2021 года* [Patriarchal Sermon on the Day of Remembrance of Rev. Sergius of Radonezh. October 8, 2021]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5850774.html>

¹¹ *Полное собрание русских летописей. Т. 15: Рогожский летописец. Тверской сборник.* Москва, 2000, 139. [Complete collection of Russian chronicles. Т. 15: Rogozhsky Chronicler. Tver collection. Moscow, 2000, 139]: http://history.org.ua/LiberUA/e_dzherela_Pol_Sobr_Rus_let_t15_2000/e_dzherela_Pol_Sobr_Rus_let_t15_2000.pdf

¹² *Полное собрание русских летописей. Т. 18. Симоновская летопись.* Санкт-Петербург: Типография М. А. Александрова, 1913, 17-18. [Complete collection of Russian chronicles. vol. 18. Simeonovskaya chronicle. St. Petersburg: Typography of M. A. Aleksandrov, 1913, 17-18]: <https://colovrat.at.ua/bibliotheca/psr18.html>

¹³ *Троицкая летопись: Реконструкция текста.* Москва-Ленинград: Издательство Академии наук СССР, 1950, 419-20. [Trinity Chronicle: Reconstruction of the text. Moscow-Leningrad: Publishing House of the USSR Academy of Sciences, 1950, 419-20]: <https://colovrat.at.ua/bibliotheca/psr1-troitskaya.html>

blessed and inspired, or as one who contemplated and recorded, or even as one who simply prayed for victory in a remote monastery.

Instead, in 1379, the saint's name is mentioned in connection with the founding of a monastery on the Dubenka River and the opening of the Church of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin at the will of the Grand Duke. Then he is mentioned immediately after the Battle, in 1381, in connection with the visit of Metropolitan of Kyiv Cyprian to Moscow.¹⁴ Sergius of Radonezh is mentioned 14 times in the "Trinity Chronicle," including in situations of dialogues or joint actions with Dmitry Donskoy, but he was never the one who blesses the battle or sends "holy warriors" to the battlefield.

Nevertheless, it is the idea of "Sergius' blessing" that creates a bridge between Russia's past and present military conflicts, between Russia's religious and military life. The story of the summoning of two monks by a venerable elder to participate in the battle with the Mongols becomes one of the key themes in the sermons of Patriarch Kirill dedicated to the anniversaries of the Battle of Kulikovo, holidays in honor of holy and pious princes from the saints of the Russian Church and revered icons of the Mother of God. In one of them, Kirill (Gyndyaev) states:

And we know that Prince Dmitry Donskoy, setting off for the fateful battle with the conquerors, came precisely to Rev. Sergius in order to receive his blessing. And the Reverend blessed him and gave two monks, Peresvet and Oslabya, so that they would join the military army and take part in the battle, which was of crucial importance both for the country, and for the people, and for the Russian Church.¹⁵

The constant reminder of this church myth resulted in parishioners' understanding that the Russian Orthodox Church not only can, but also has the right and even the duty to be present on the battlefield with the enemies of the motherland. During Russia's war with Ukraine, the insinuation of such an idea even caused a discussion about whether the monks of Russian monasteries should leave their abodes and join the ranks of the troops that proudly marched to "liberate Ukraine from the fascists." Metropolitan Hilarion even had to make a special comment on it in March of 2022, saying that even if we know from history that among the disciples of St. Sergius of Radonezh there were two schema monks who participated in the battle being glorified as saints, modern day monks did not need and should not go to serve in the army.

¹⁴ *Полное собрание русских летописей. Т. 18. Симеоновская летопись.* Санкт-Петербург: Типография М. А. Александрова, 1913, 18. [Complete collection of Russian chronicles. vol. 18. Simeonovskaya chronicle. St. Petersburg: Typography of M. A. Aleksandrov, 1913, 18]: <https://colovrat.at.ua/bibliotheca/psr118.html>

¹⁵ *Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю 4-ю по Пятидесятнице, день памяти преподобного Сергия Радонежского. 18 июля 2021 года* [Patriarchal sermon on the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, the feast day of Rev. Sergius of Radonezh. July 18, 2021]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5829280.html>

However, the metropolitan mentioned “the exception of special circumstances” for service in the army by friars.¹⁶

The answer to the question of why the Moscow patriarch clings so strongly to the image of St. Sergius in the creation of the concept of a new boundless “Russian world” lies in how he and his church interpret the ancient elder. For them, he becomes really inseparable from the military past of Muscovy. In their speeches and doctrine, they not only call him “a spiritual weapon,” but also associate him with the main prayer for the Russian Armed Forces. It is noteworthy that it was Patriarch Kirill who took up the militarization of the image of the holy ascetic. In April 2019, with the blessing of Kirill (Gundyaev), veneration of St. Sergius as the heavenly patron of the military signalmen was approved. On July 18, on the day of the discovery of the shrines of St. Sergius (1422), a Divine Liturgy is held in the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, the main temple of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, attended by representatives of the leadership and staff of the Main Communications Department of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. And on the day of the memory of Saint Sergius, military signalmen were instructed by the clergy to carry out their service with dignity, being inspired by the age-old traditions of the Christ-loving army of Holy Rus.

To make the union “Reverend Sergius–Armed Forces” sound better, the Patriarchate of Moscow explained that the name of Reverend Sergius of Radonezh has been related to the history of the Military Communications Academy since 1917, when by the decision of the Provisional Government, the accelerated training courses of the Officers’ Electrical School, on the basis of which the Academy was founded on November 8, 1919, were evacuated from Petrograd to Sergiev Posad. From that time until 1923, the school was located on the territory of the Trinity-Sergius Lavra.¹⁷

Thus, Sergius of Radonezh becomes the patron saint of the Russian army, who understand him as the main prayer leader for the army before the throne of God. This can be seen from the presence of his relics in the ark with particles of the shrines, complete with the main icon of the

¹⁶ Митрополит Волоколамский Иларион: Важно, чтобы представители крупнейших христианских Церквей общались между собой в этот критический момент. 27 марта 2022 [Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk: It is important that representatives of the largest Christian Churches communicate with each other at this critical moment. March 27, 2022]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5912900.html>

¹⁷ Военные связисты в день памяти своего небесного покровителя приняли участие в богослужении в Главном храме Вооруженных сил РФ 18 июля 2020 года [On the day of commemoration of their heavenly patron, military signalmen took part in the service at the Main Temple of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on July 18, 2020]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5666245.html>

Armed Forces of the Russian Federation “Savior of the Unmade.”¹⁸ Elder Sergius becomes the inspirer of the army, a fighter and defender, the victor not only over religious evil, but also of the enemy in the flesh—the one with whom Moscow is fighting at a certain time in history. This is evident from the epithets and comparisons with which church hierarchs speak about him. Thus, during the consecration of the monument to Saint Sergius in Orenburg on July 18, 2019, Metropolitan Veniamin of Orenburg and Saraktash said:

...he became the salt of our earth, he stood at the beginning of the foundation of our state, he blessed the sword that protected the Russian lands on the Kulikovo field, he created good and truth. Wherever he appeared, the monk, peace and prosperity appeared everywhere.... He is the defender of the Fatherland, he is the conqueror of the forces of evil, he is the keeper of our country.¹⁹

The idea of the sacred unity of the “Russian world” is raised every time Patriarch Kirill touches the topic of the Battle of Kulikovo or the figure of Sergius of Radonezh. Thus, during his speech at the plenary session of the 30th International Educational Readings on May 23, 2022, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church presents the image of Sergius as a “spiritual core of the Russian world,” as an axis around which he forms the concept of “historical Rus.” For this, high generalizing comparisons and epithets are used. On the basis of these maxims, Kirill (Gundyayev) formulates appeals for the spiritual (and here read also political) unity of all who share the values of Moscow Christianity:

The unification of historical Rus is particularly important today. “With unity and love, we will be saved”—this is the message addressed to the people by Saint Sergius of Radonezh, the 600th anniversary of the discovery of whose shrines we are also celebrating this year. This call of the Hegumen of the Rus Land sounds throughout the centuries and today, especially in connection with the attempts of the forces that act against the interests of the Russian world, to tear this world apart, to collide parts of this world, including in a real physical conflict, in a war.²⁰

The figure of St. Sergius becomes important in the construction of the ideology of the “Russian world” also because he becomes a bridge for creating an idea of the “common space” of Rus. Thus, the Patriarch blessed the reading of the “Prayer for the Restoration of Peace” in Russian churches in March of 2022. In it, along with the first appeal to the Lord God Jesus

¹⁸ *Главная икона Вооруженных сил Российской Федерации принесена в Санкт-Петербург 18 марта 2020 года* [The main icon of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation was brought to St. Petersburg on March 18, 2020]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5609685.html>

¹⁹ *В Оренбурге освящен памятник преподобному Сергию Радонежскому. 18 июля 2019 года* [A monument to Saint Sergius of Radonezh was consecrated in Orenburg. July 18, 2019]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5473492.html>

²⁰ *Выступление Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на пленарном заседании XXX Международных образовательных чтений 23 мая 2022 года.* [Speech of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the plenary session of the 30th International Educational Readings on May 23, 2022]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5928249.html>

Christ and Virgin Mary, only certain saints are mentioned. Among the ancient, canonized saints of Rus, whose territory of life and repose of their relics is in modern Ukraine, these are equal-to-the-apostles Grand Duke Volodymyr of Kyiv and Grand Duchess Olha of Kyiv, Reverend Anthony and Feodosius of Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, and Job of Pochaiv. From among others who represent the territory of modern Russia, the holy New Martyrs and confessors of the Russian Church, Seraphim of Sarov and, with the rest, Sergius, Abbot of Radonezh are mentioned.²¹ Therefore, Sergius of Radonezh becomes not only the patron of the armed forces, but also the one to whom to pray for “proper peace” in Ukraine—in spiritual and, in the future, in territorial and political unity with Muscovy. Finally, already six months from that, in September 2022, Patriarch Kirill recommend praying for this “united space” without even pointing out common or regional saints, such as Sergius of Radonezh (for who needs boundaries in the boundless “Russian world”?), but directly praying to God to “restore peace and unanimity in all the countries of Holy Rus”, because “those who want to fight have rebelled against Holy Rus, wanting to divide and destroy the united people.”²²

The Idea of the Blessing by Metropolitan Cyprian

There is another church version of events, which adds the blessing of the Metropolitan of Kyiv to this cocktail of factual distortions and mytho-poetic ideas about events from the history of the medieval times. This false historical-religious idea builds a connection between Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Rus Cyprian (1375-1406) with the blessing of Dmitry Donskoy for the battle with the Tatars. According to the “Tale of the Battle with Mamai,” the Prince of Moscow received the Metropolitan’s blessing for the battle immediately after the blessing of Sergius of Radonezh:

And the Great Prince rejoiced in his heart, but he did not tell anyone what Saint Sergius told him. And he went to his glorious city of Moscow, rejoicing in the blessing of the holy elder, with whom he received the unstolen treasure. And, returning to Moscow, he went with his brother, with Prince Vladimir Andreyevich, to His Holiness Metropolitan Cyprian, and told him secretly everything that the elder Rev. Sergius had told only him, and what blessing he had given him and his entire Orthodox army. The archbishop ordered to keep these words a secret, not to tell anyone.²³

²¹ *Циркулярное письмо управляющего делами Московской Патриархии митрополита Воскресенского Дионисия № 01/944 от 3 марта 2022 года* [Circular Letter No. 01/944 of March 3, 2022, Metropolitan of the Resurrection Dionysius, Head of the Moscow Patriarchate]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5905833.html>

²² *Молитва о Святой Руси. 25 сентября 2022 года* [Prayer for Holy Rus'. September 25, 2022]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/ua/db/text/5962656.html>

²³ *Сказание о Мамаевом побоище*. [Tale of the Battle with Mamai]: <https://www.vostlit.info/Texts/rus8/Mamaj/text.phtml?id=895>

This idea has never been mentioned by Patriarch Kirill himself during the construction of the heroic version of history of Russian weapons in the course of collecting Rus' lands. However, the official website of Moscow Patriarchy possesses a great number of documents announcing the role of “the son of the Bulgarian people,²⁴ St. Cyprian, whose relics are now buried in the Assumption Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin,” in preserving the Russian state²⁵ (and some materials are in the direct connection with the events of Kulikovo battle²⁶). During the prayers at the shrine with the remains of Saint Cyprian in the Kremlin, speeches suggest that this religious figure of the past was an active developer not only of the ancient church, but also of the Moscow Duchy – in protection of that land, investment in culture and art – in close cooperation with the Moscow prince Dmitry Donskoy.²⁷

However, the historical inconsistency, which was already noted by the commentators on the “Tale of the Battle with Mamai” but was forgotten because of the passing of the milestones of history and ideology, consisted in the fact that the Metropolitan of Kyiv, Rus and Lithuania Cyprian, ordained to a high rank by Patriarch Philofeus of Constantinople, was not actually recognized by Dmitry Donskoy. The Moscow prince, instead, wanted to see in his pocket the archimandrite of the Spassky Monastery, Mykhail Mityai, as the first hierarch of all Rus.

The Desired Unity of Political and Spiritual Power

Patriarch Kirill's false idea about the unity of the “Russian world” and the “historical Rus” (promoted by him as an outpost of Christian civilization) is destroyed by the evidence of Rus' chronicles. Mityai wanted to become the first hierarch against the will of Constantinople, even being ready to become an independently ordained metropolitan. In the “Rogozhsky Chronicle” there is evidence he arbitrarily named himself as the head of the church against the

²⁴ *Состоялась братская беседа Предстоятелей Русской и Болгарской Православных Церквей. 27 мая 2014 года* [A fraternal discussion of the Heads of the Russian and Bulgarian Orthodox Churches took place. May 27, 2014]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3661919.html>

²⁵ *Доклад митрополита Волоколамского Илариона на конференции «История Болгарской Православной Церкви как предмет академического изучения в духовных школах Русской Православной Церкви» 10 октября 2019 года* [Report of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at the conference “History of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as a subject of academic study in theological schools of the Russian Orthodox Church” October 10, 2019]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5490806.html>

²⁶ *Всяк уповай на Тя, Владычице, не погибнет! 8 июля 2021 года* [Everyone who trusts in Thee, Lady, will not perish! July 8, 2021]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5826493.html>

²⁷ *В день памяти святителя Киприана Московского митрополит Крутицкий и Коломенский Ювеналий совершил Литургию в Успенском соборе Московского Кремля 29 сентября 2014 года* [On the day of memory of St. Cyprian of Moscow, Metropolitan of Krutitsy and Kolomna Juvenaly celebrated the Liturgy in the Assumption Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin on September 29, 2014]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3769891.html>

will and without the lifelong blessing of his predecessor, but due to the whims of Prince Dmitry of Moscow:

After the death of Metropolitan Aleksiy, a certain Archimandrite, named Mikhail, called Mityai, took his place and did a terrible and unusual thing, stepping up in the metropolitan rank and putting on the metropolitan hood, and the metropolitan omophorion, and taking the metropolitan seal and staff, and simply deciding to put himself in the rank of metropolitan. Previously, the great prince Dmitriy asked the metropolitan about this, and the metropolitan did not bless him; because Mityai was young and was condemned by everyone.²⁸

A small council of bishops was even convened for this purpose. In the “Trinity Chronicle” we read:

Having thought about this, Mityai spoke to the great prince alone, saying: “I read the books called Nomocanon, which are the essence of apostolic and paternal rules, and I acquired this wisdom that five or six worthy bishops will gather and appoint a bishop; and now let your state order quickly, which dioceses are in all of Rus, let the bishops come to make me a bishop.” By order of the prince, the bishops gathered; not a single one of them dared to speak against Mityai, but only Dionysus, the bishop of Suzdal restrainedly told the grand prince: “It is not fitting that such a thing should happen.”²⁹

Archimandrite Mityai, a favorite of Dmitry of Don, went to Constantinople for a blessing through the Mongolian lands, where he enlisted the support of the Khan of the Horde. According to the Nikon Chronicle, “he was stopped by the Tatars, brought to Mamai in the Horde, then released by Mamai with peace and mercy.”³⁰ This is the same emir Mamai with whom in a short time the “blessed war” of Dmitry Donskoy would unfold. Archimandrite Mityai even received an order confirming the privileges of the Russian Church: “Tsar Atyulyak also gave Metropolitan Mikhail an order (*yarlyk*).” This ruler should be understood as Tulun-Bekyakhan, whom all such orders refer to as the nephew of the emir, Mamai.³¹

Here we can talk about the collapse of several concepts of the modern idea of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding the unity of the church and the government in the times of medieval

²⁸ *Полное собрание русских летописей. Т. 15: Рогожский летописец. Тверской сборник.* Москва, 2000, 122. [Complete collection of Russian chronicles. T. 15: Rogozhsky Chronicler. Tver collection. Moscow, 2000, 122]: http://history.org.ua/LiberUA/e_dzherela_Pol_Sobr_Rus_let_t15_2000/e_dzherela_Pol_Sobr_Rus_let_t15_2000.pdf

²⁹ *Троицкая летопись: Реконструкция текста.* Москва-Ленинград: Издательство Академии наук СССР, 1950, 410. [Trinity Chronicle: Reconstruction of the text. Moscow-Leningrad: Publishing House of the USSR Academy of Sciences, 1950, 410]:

³⁰ Григорьев, В. В. *О достоверности ярлыков, данных ханами Золотой Орды русскому духовенству: Историко-филологическое исследование В. Григорьева.* Москва: Университетская типография, 1842, 83. [Grigoriev, V. V. About the authenticity of orders given by the Khans of the Golden Horde to the Russian clergy: Historical and philological research by V. Grigoriev. Moscow: University Typography, 1842, 83]: https://archive.org/details/libgen_00593583/page/n49/mode/2up

³¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

Moscow and the eternal struggle of Christian parishioners with their pagan neighbors. Despite the fact that the proteges of the Moscow princes sought to consolidate their power precisely by paying obeisance to the Mongol khans, Patriarch Kirill presents to the modern average Russians a picture of a heroic Christian confrontation:

Let us recall, for example, the terrible Mongol-Tatar invasion. They conquered half of Europe, so that Rus found itself inside a huge territory that the Horde khan considered his forever, and there was no one who could defeat this military-political force that controlled the vast expanses of Eurasia. But what happened? Venerable Sergius, a humble elder, blesses Dmitry Donskoy, a courageous prince and warrior, to go and give battle to this invincible Tatar-Mongol army.³²

The spiritual unity that Patriarch Kirill tries to popularize, appealing to the times of the Kulikovo battle, seems actually to be a “disunity.” The story of the confrontation between Prince Dmitry of Don and Metropolitan Cyprian, mentioned above, takes on a new meaning when you read the “Trinity Chronicle.” In it, the author records interesting moods among believers and clergy due to the fact that the prince and his close friend Archimandrite Mityai wanted to unify secular and spiritual power. When Mityai, after unsuccessful attempts to conduct his own ordination in Moscow, went to Constantinople and died, the chronicler wrote in 1379:

All the bishops and presbyters and priests asked God and prayed that he would not allow Mityai to be the metropolitan, and what happened, and God heard his people, and did not allow him to be a pastor and metropolitan in Rus.³³

Therefore, the church unity, to which the Russian Patriarch so often appeals in the matter of Russia’s war in Ukraine, in the time of Dmitry of Don was expressed precisely in opposition to the prince’s will but not in the sacralization of the decisions and whims of secular power by the religious structure. However, ordinary priests probably do not know, and educated religious leaders do not demonstrate to their parishes the worldview differences that existed between the authorities and the church, so as not to raise the issue of the ambiguity of the symphony of the state and the church in Russia’s history. I believe, that if facts like this one were voiced to the modern Russian flock, then, surely, there would not be a blind slavish following of the words

³² Слово Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла в Неделю 2-ю Великого поста после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя 20 марта 2022 [Word of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill on the 2nd Sunday of Great Lent after the Liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior March 20, 2022]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5909901.html>

³³ Троицкая летопись: Реконструкция текста. Москва-Ленинград: Издательство Академии наук СССР, 1950, 417. [Trinity Chronicle: Reconstruction of the text. Moscow-Leningrad: Publishing House of the USSR Academy of Sciences, 1950, 417]: <https://colovrat.at.ua/bibliotheca/psrl-troitskaya.html>

and orders of both the newly appeared autocratic leader Putin and the newly appeared supreme ideologist Kirill.

The idea of Cyprian as a person concerned about Moscow affairs is also invalidated by the chronicles. As mentioned above, during modern prayers and in the speeches of churchmen with the blessing of and personally by Patriarch Kirill, this figure is called “St. Cyprian of Moscow”³⁴ although during his lifetime he never bore such a title, being called Metropolitan of Kyiv, Rus and Lithuania (1375-1380), Metropolitan of Little Rus and Lithuania (1380-1389), Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Rus (1389-1406).

Moreover, the existence of a conflict between the prince of Moscow and the First Hierarchy of the Rus Orthodox Church was known for centuries, which made the author of the *Moscow Patericon* even straightforwardly record the impossibility of Metropolitan Cyprian being in the Kremlin as follows: “Cyprian was coldly received in Moscow and had to temporarily settle in Kyiv. A whole thirteen years passed in church turmoil.”³⁵ In this conflict, Metropolitan Cyprian was insulted by the Moscow prince in the summer of 1378, when he was on his way from Kyiv to Moscow. The metropolitan himself wrote a letter to Abbot Sergius of Radonezh, in which he described in detail all the troubles caused by the prince, who, according to a version of “The Tale of Battle with Mamai,” was supposed to be blessed for the battle both by the abused metropolitan and the holy elder.

And he sent out his ambassadors so as not to let me go, and he also raised garrisons, gathering troops and placing the voivodes in front of them; and whatever evil to do to me, and moreover give us to death without mercy, he taught and commanded them. I, being more worried about his dishonor and soul, took another path, hoping for my sincerity and my love, which I had for the grand prince, and for his princess, and for his children. He also put a torturer near me, the accursed Nikifor. And is there any evil left that he did not inflict on me! Blames and insults, mockery, robbery, hunger! He imprisoned me naked and hungry at night. And after that cold night, I still suffer. They were angry with many of my servants in what was done to them, letting them go on old weak mares without saddles, in clothes from the bast fiber³⁶—they took them out of the city robbed down to their shirts, and to their pants, and to their puttee; and boots and hats were not left on them!³⁷

³⁴ *Предстоятель Болгарской Православной Церкви совершил молебен в крестовом храме резиденции Святейшего Патриарха Московского и всея Руси. 23 мая 2014 года* [The Primate of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church performed a prayer service in the cross church of the residence of the Most Holy Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. May 23, 2014]: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3654540.html>

³⁵ *Московский патерик* / сост. Е. Н. Погожев. [*Moscow paterik* / comp. E. N. Pogozhev]. Moscow: Publishing House of the Moscow Nobility, 1912: https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Zhitija_svjatykh/moskovskij-paterik/27

³⁶ A strong woody fiber obtained chiefly from the phloem of plants and used especially in cordage, matting, and fabrics.

³⁷ *Грамота митрополита Киприана к преподобному Сергию радонежскому и Феодору, игумену симоновскому, с жалобами на великого князя Дмитрия Ивановича и с обличением незаконных притязаний архимандрита Митяя на московскую митрополию 1378 г. июня 23.* [The letter of Metropolitan Cyprian to Venerable Sergius of Radonezh and Feodor, Abbot of Simonovsky, with mourning for the Grand Duke Dmitriy

After the disgraceful expulsion of the Metropolitan back to Kyiv by Prince Dmitry, Cyprian subjected the Moscow ruler to anathema and cursed him and everyone related to the Metropolitan's imprisonment in June 1378:

And then such dishonor was laid on me and on my priesthood: from the grace given to me by the Most Holy and Life-giving Trinity, according to the rules of the holy Fathers and divine Apostles, if those who were involved in my seizure and imprisonment, and dishonor and blasphemy, if they spoke on that advice, let them be excommunicated and unblessed by me, Cyprian, Metropolitan of All Rus, and cursed according to the rules of the holy Fathers, and whoever is tempted to burn or hide this document, should suffer the same.³⁸

Therefore, it is not accurate talking about the church blessing in 1380. It is noteworthy that Cyprian was closely supported by the abbot of the Trinity Monastery, Sergius of Radonezh, with whom the first hierarch corresponded. It was through them that he tried to warn of such an inhospitable reception of the Moscow prince, sending them a letter on February 12, 1378:

I am going to Moscow to my son, the Grand Duke; I go with peace and blessing, as Joseph once went to his brothers from his father. No matter what some people say about me, I am not a warrior, but a bishop. I bring blessings, according to the words of the Lord, who said when sending his disciples to preach: "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me" (Matthew 10, 40; John 13: 20). Therefore, where you see good, there prepare to see me. I long forward to see you and receive spiritual comfort from you.³⁹

Relations between the ruler of Moscow and the Metropolitan of Kyiv improved somewhat after the Battle of Kulikovo, but not for long.

Historical Parallels

However, there is a historical parallel also from the one adored by Kirill (Gundyaev) in the 14th century, when the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Church, sitting in Moscow and claiming the title of Metropolitan of All Rus, blessed the war against the population of the lands that are now called Ukraine. It was the time of confrontation between the Moscow principality and the Lithuanian, Russ, and Zhemanti principalities. The political war became at the same time a religious war, which Patriarch Kirill does not like to mention, because it proves the

Ivanovich and with the denunciation of Archimandrite Mityai's illegal claims to the Moscow Metropolitanate, June 23, 1378]: https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Aleksej_Pavlov/pamjatniki-drevne-russkogo-kanonicheskogo-prava/20

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Иоанн Мейендорф. "История церкви и восточно-христианская мистика". *Византия и Московская Русь*. Москва: Институт ДИ-ДИК, 2000, 337-526. [Meyendorff, Ioann. "Church history and Eastern Christian mysticism". *Byzantium and Moscow Rus'*. Moscow: DI-DIK Institute, 2000, 337-526]: https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Ioann_Mejendorf/vizantija-i-moskovskaja-rus/9#note587_return

shakiness of the idea of “an eternally united Rus.” Metropolitan Aleksiy Byakont (1292-1378) was confirmed in the rank of Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Rus by the letter of Patriarch Philofeus of Constantinople dated June 30, 1354, and Vladimir-on-the-Klyazma was confirmed as the residence of the metropolitans with Kyiv as the first throne, although their actual residence was located in Moscow.

In the course of political and religious games, in 1370, Patriarch Philofeus made Bishop Anthony a Metropolitan of Halych and designated his authority in the dioceses of Kholm, Turov, and Volodymyr in Volyn and in the Peremyshl (Przemysl) diocese of Galicia. The Patriarch reproached Aleksiy for the fact that he neglected the Orthodox people of these lands, that the metropolitan established himself in Moscow, leaving others without pastoral care:

Your Holiness knows very well that when we ordained you, we ordained you as the Metropolitan of Kyiv and all of Rus, not just one part of it, but all of Rus; now I hear that you are neither in Kyiv nor in Lithuania, but in only one country... This is a difficult and disgusting retelling of the sacred canons. You should survey the entire Rus land and have paternal love and affection for all the princes—to love them is one thing....⁴⁰

Prince Algirdas of Lithuania wrote frankly to the patriarch about the actions of the metropolitan in 1370:

For your blessing, the Metropolitan blesses them for the shedding of blood to this day. And under the times of our parents, there were no such metropolitans as this metropolitan. He blesses Muscovites for the shedding of blood, and he neither comes to us nor visits Kyiv. And whoever kisses the cross to me⁴¹ and flees to them, the Metropolitan removes the kissing of the cross from him....⁴²

Patriarch Kirill’s claim to guardianship of Ukraine as the original territory of the metropolitans of Moscow contradicts even the epoch of the Battle of Don, in which the quantitative and qualitative composition of the dioceses spoke for itself. In this era, the territory of Little Rus’ was under the influence of Moscow’s religious rulers. Pro-Moscow-oriented church historians called the regions of northeastern Rus “Great Rus” (read modern Russia), while “Little Rus” stood for the southwestern principalities (read modern Ukraine).

Even according to their “pro-imperial” calculations, the so-called “Little Rus’ group” was greater in number of dioceses consisting of nine religious provinces (“permanent” dioceses of

⁴⁰ *Его же (патриарха Филофея) грамота к митрополиту Алексию, с увещанием помириться с Тверским князем Михаилом и не оставлять Литовских епархий без пастырского надзора 1371 г.* [His (Patriarch Philofeus’) letter to Metropolitan Aleksiy, with an admonition to make peace with the Prince of Tver, Mikhail, and not to leave the Lithuanian dioceses without pastoral supervision, 1371] https://www.vostlit.info/Texts/Dokumenty/Byzanz/XIV/1360-1380/Filofej/1371_1.htm

⁴¹ i.e. pledges loyalty.

⁴² Мейендорф, op. cit.

Halych, Volodymyr-Volynskyi, Peremyshl, Lutsk, Turiv, and Kholm; Chernihiv (at some time united with Bryansk), Polotsk, and Smolensk). Subsequently, three more dioceses were added there—Pereyaslav, Bilhorod, and Yuriiv (the latter abolished in the 14th century). And only seven dioceses of Vladimir-on-the-Klyazma, Novgorod, Rostov, Suzdal, Sarai of Batu, Ryazan, and Tver, together with the dioceses of Kolomna and Perm, formed in the 14th century, were part of the dioceses of “Great Rus.”⁴³ Thus, not the most ancient, not the most numerous dioceses were under the power of the northern church leaders, but those that were formed only as Moscow principality and the Mongol ulus expanded. And of course, Kyiv, the ancient capital of Rus did not belong to the sphere of that “northern” influence, which makes it impossible to talk about some kind of unity between Moscow and Kyiv in the ecclesiastical-administrative way until the times of Peter the Great in the 18th century.

The capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453 and the strengthening of the influence of Catholicism in Eastern Europe led to the final disintegration of the ancient metropolitanate and further building of firm borders between Moscow and Kyiv spiritual worlds. On November 15, 1458, the former Patriarch of Constantinople Gregory III Mammis appointed Gregory II the Bulgarian as the new Metropolitan of Kyiv. And Pope Pius II already established nine dioceses for him: Bryansk, Smolensk, Peremyshl, Turiv, Lutsk, Volodymyr-Volynskyi, Polotsk, Kholm and Halych. Moscow, as a fragment of the Metropolitanate of Kyiv with a self-proclaimed metropolitan at that time and until 1560, was in schism with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and, in fact, in a century-long spiritual isolation. Thus, the unity of “sacred Rus” appears to live only in patriarch Kirill’s head.

Conclusions

The religio-political cocktail of ideas, known as the concept of the “Russian world,” through the prism of the sermons of the Moscow Patriarch Kirill, relies on a distorted image of the past. It was formed on the basis of the Russian imperial idea of Orthodoxy, nationhood and autocracy and the Soviet doctrine of confrontation with the West. This ideologeme offers a prominent place for the idea that the patriarch broadcasts the elements of historical memory, which are ordered in time and space.

Instead, a fragmentary appeal to events and phenomena separated by centuries and socio-cultural epochs, without taking into account the geopolitics of different periods, leads to the suggestion of a historical myth. Voiced from the church pulpit, it becomes sacred. The myth’s

⁴³ Ibid.

inclusion of the untouchable world of “holy ideas” is reinforced by the patriarch’s appeal to the life-stories of Rus’ saints (Sergius of Radonezh and Metropolitan Cyprian), woven into the fabric of Russia’s military history (Kulikovo battle).

Saint Sergius is often called by the Moscow Patriarch the “abbot of the Rus land,” which itself is defined as an outpost of Christian civilization. Moreover, the patriarch considers only Russia within its imaginary borders of the “Russian world” to be Christian. Instead, people of the Western world for him are no longer even Christians in a schism, as one might think, knowing his attitude towards Catholicism and Protestantism. Everything that is “not-Russia,” “not-Moscow-Orthodox”--everything is hostile, infidel, foreign, destructive, and conflicting.

As the historical records makes clear, during the time of Dmitry Donskoy, the idea of a united Holy Rus, promoted now by Kirill (Gundyaev), was never implemented. Until the end of the life of the Moscow ruler, Metropolitan Cyprian to whom Patriarch Kirill appeals as to the symbol of religious unity, was never able to receive the All-Rus title of hierarch—he was dragged through the church courts, where at one time they even left the truncated title of Metropolitan of Little Rus and Lithuania (with the exclusion of Kyiv), and in 1382 the prince expelled Cyprian to Kyiv because of suspicions of an alliance with the Lithuanian prince Algirdas. Entry into full rights as Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Rus happened only after the death of Dmitry Donskoy.

On this basis, the patriarch tries to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Such a hermeneutic of the past from the Patriarch, which demonstrates a direct connection between the past and the present, forms in the average parishioner of the Russian Orthodox Church the idea of the “sanctity” of the war unleashed by Putin and the logic of all geopolitical events in view of the need to establish “historical justice.” The image of the “blessed army” in the fight against a foreign tribe and an infidel is rather an ideological myth, which Patriarch Kirill tries to rely on despite the obvious historical inconsistency. Such an appeal seems all the weaker considering the fact that modern Russia’s war is being waged with Orthodox Ukraine, not non-believers, unless one has in mind the periodic propaganda calls to fight against the “collective West” that “rules Ukraine.”